

Physicians' Perceptions Toward Electronic Communication with Patients

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Background

Despite the widespread use of email, electronic communication between physicians and patients is not part of the standard physician-patient relationship in the United States. Increased use of email may improve physician-patient communication, which is associated with improved patient satisfaction and health status. Evaluating email communication in this context is vital to minimizing potential risks and maximizing benefit to physicians and patients. We evaluated email use between physicians and patients, and physicians' perceptions of the value and issues surrounding this form of communication in order to identify issues that would facilitate and improve electronic communication.

Methods

A paper-based survey was sent to 94 primary care physicians in an integrated delivery system. We assessed the role email plays in a typical workday and the barriers to increasing email use with patients. A structured interview was also performed with a subset of respondents that reported the highest percentage of email use with patients. The interviews evaluated how physician-patient email contact is typically initiated, approaches to managing emails such as triaging and guidelines, the content of emails, and physician views on how email communication could be improved. Physicians were not using an electronic application specifically designed for email use with patients, but rather personal accounts.

Results

Seventy-one of 94 physicians responded to the survey for a response rate of 76%. All respondents currently use email. Sixty-eight percent of physicians use email with their patients, but the majority do so with only 1-5% of their patient panel. The main reported barriers to physician-patient email related to workload, security and payment. Interviews with 10 of the survey respondents revealed that the actual

time spent and quantity of emails are minimal; physician contact with patients ranges from 2-5 patients on a typical day, with an average of two emails per patient (received and sent). Patients generally initiated email contact. Guidelines regarding the use of email are seldom given to patients. Most emails from patients relate to prescription refills, referrals, appointments, test results and questions relating to personal healthcare. In all interviewed cases, physicians are the first to read email and responded directly.

Conclusion

Electronic communication between physicians and patients has great potential to improve communication, but needs to go beyond the basic functionality of typical email. Our findings indicate that with adequate pre-screening, triage, and reimbursement mechanisms, physicians would be open to substantially increasing electronic communication with patients. Formal guidelines for patients and physicians, along with a measured approach to introducing electronic communication to patients, would capitalize on potential gains in efficiency and quality of care.